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Showy partridge pea [*Chamaecrista fasciculata* (Michx.) Greene] with potential for cultivation as a multi-functional species in the United States

J. B. Morris

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Abstract Showy partridge pea, *Chamaecrista fasciculata* is used in the USA for cover cropping, ornate flowers in native gardens, honey crop, as an annual reseeded legume for restoration and conservation plantings, and wildlife food. However, its greatest potential may be as a bio-control plant for the control of mole crickets, cactus moth, and additional pest species. The United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service, Plant Genetic Resources Conservation Unit (USDA, ARS, PGRCU) conserves 36 accessions originating from the USA.

Keywords *Chamaecrista fasciculata* · Extrafloral nectaries · Showy partridge pea

Introduction

Showy partridge pea, *Chamaecrista fasciculata* (Michx.) Greene is primarily a cross-pollinated diploid ($2n = 16$) [Erickson and Fenster 2006] annual legume native to the eastern, midwest, and southern United States (USDA NRCS 2012). It has several additional common names including sleeping plant,

prairie partridge pea, prairie senna, large-flowered sensitive-pea, dwarf cassia, partridge pea senna, locust weed and golden cassia.

Although partridge pea foliage is nutritious, it can be poisonous and should be considered potentially dangerous to cattle. Partridge pea leaves and seeds contain a cathartic substance. This substance is effective either in fresh plant material or in dry hay. Domestic livestock will eat partridge pea leaves. However, if large quantities are consumed, the animal may be stressed and die (Houck and Row 2006). It is also used to produce honey, but the flowers do not produce nectar.

Nectar is produced in the extrafloral nectaries and may attract ants thereby protecting the plant against insect attack (Kelly 1986). The function for these nectaries was debated until Bentley (1977) proved that the primary function of extrafloral nectar is to attract insect plant guards that protect the plants from herbivores. Root medicine derived from showy partridge pea by the Cherokee was used to keep ball players from tiring and a compound infusion was given for fainting spells (Hamel and Chiltoskey 1975). Additional ethnobotanical uses include a cold decoction of the plant used for nausea and the plant was also used as a bed for ripening persimmons by the Seminole (Sturtevant 1954). Showy partridge pea has been shown to control *Staphylococcus aureus* in vitro (Borchardt et al. 2008). Showy partridge pea extrafloral nectaries provide nectar needed by the parasitoid wasp, *Larra bicolor*. Since mole cricket populations are parasitized by *L. bicolor* in Florida fields consisting

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of showy partridge pea, these mole crickets were successfully reduced (Portman et al. 2010). Jezorek et al. (2011) suggests that *Opuntia* plants growing in close proximity to showy partridge pea had less cactus moth damage than those farther away which may be attributed to higher ant activity. Variation among showy partridge pea populations for nectary size, sugar production, nectar volume, with less variation for leaf pubescence has been found (Rios et al. 2008).

Materials and methods

All 29 showy partridge pea accessions used in this study are curated at the USDA, ARS, Plant Genetic Resources Conservation Unit (PGRCU) located in Griffin, GA, USA. The seed accessions studied were collected, donated, or developed as cultivars from the USA states of Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and New Jersey. These accessions were grown in the field at the USDA, ARS, PGRCU in Griffin, Georgia during 2006 and 2011.

Results and discussion

The plants were determined to be *C. fasciculata* and specimen accessions are conserved at the USDA, ARS, PGRCU in Griffin, Georgia.

Taxonomy and nomenclature

Chamaecrista fasciculata (Michx.) Greene ex Rydb. in Fl. Colorado (1906) 194; (Michx.) Greene in Pittonia 3 (17C) (1897) 242.

Syn.: *Chamaecrista robusta* (Pollard) Pollard ex A. Heller in Cat. N. Amer. 2 (1900) 5; *Cassia robusta* (Pollard) Pollard in Bull. Torrey Bot. Club 24 (1897) 150; *C. fasciculata* Michx. in Fl. bor.-amer. 1 (1803) 262; *C. chamaecrista* L. var. *robusta* Pollard in Bull. Torrey Bot. Club 21 (1894) 218; *C. chamaecrista* L. in Sp. pl. 1 (1753) nom. utique rej. 379.

Short description (see also Fernald 1950; Rutter and Rausher 2004; USDA, NRCS 2012)

Annual and suberect, 1.5–9 dm tall with usually simple, ascending branches. Branches have minutely subappressed pubescence but usually scanty with

persistent and striated stipules (Fig. 1). Ten to 15 linear oblong leaflets oblique at the leaflet base and at about the third or fourth true leaf, saucer-shaped extrafloral nectaries which resemble a cup shaped gland beneath the lowest pair of leaflets are located at the base of each petiole (Fig. 2). Each nectary is approximately 0.5–4 mm across and can secrete near 3 μ L of nectar per day. Since nearly all leaves have at least one nectary, more than 200 nectaries can exist on a large plant. The indeterminate flowers bloom from July to September and produce a straight fruit. Large yellow flowers are approximately 2.54 cm across with 2–4 flower clusters on the stem with each flower occurring on slender pedicels and the petals often have a purple or red spot at the base (Fig. 3). Each fruit consists of a 3.8–6.4 cm pod which splits along 2 sutures as it matures and each side of the pod develops into a spiral shape to expel the seeds away from the parent plants. Pods can range from 2.5 to 5 cm long and 4–4.5 cm wide with 4–13 seeds produced per pod.

Distribution and uses

Chamaecrista fasciculata is distributed in the continental United States from New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, eastward to include all states except New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine (USDA and NRCS 2012). Showy partridge pea has several uses including wildlife food especially for the northern bobwhite and other quail species. It is also eaten by the greater and lesser prairie chickens, ring-necked pheasant, mallard, grassland birds, field mice, and deer. Showy partridge pea is also used as an ornamental plant in native gardens, for erosion control and restoration in disturbed areas since it can fix nitrogen (USDA NRCS 2012).

The *Chamaecrista* genus consists of about 330 species (Mabberley 2008) and nine of them have been reported as cultivated types (Kruse 2001). The African pantropically distributed *Chamaecrista absus* (L.) Irwin et Barneby species has been cultivated in Pakistan as a medicinal plant (Chaudhri 1953; Kerharo and Adam 1964; Thulin 1983; Uphof 1968). *Chamaecrista apoucouita* (Aublet) Irwin et Barneby is distributed throughout north-eastern South America and has been cultivated as a medicinal fruit in French Guiana (Luu 1975). *Chamaecrista mimosoides* (L.) Greene is distributed in tropical Asia, Africa, America, and Australia. It is cultivated as a green manure in

Fig. 1 Plants of *Chamaecrista fasciculata* in the regeneration field in Griffin, Georgia (Photo J. B. Morris 2006)



Indonesia and Taiwan, as a tea plant in Japan, and for forage in the Philippines where the roots are used for medicinal purposes and the leaves are consumed as a vegetable (Burkill 1966; Ching-chang and Chia 1965; Ducke 1925; Havard Duclos 1967; Hutchinson and Dalziel 1954; Luckow 1996; Uphof 1968; Whyte et al. 1953). However, *C. diphylla* Greene and *C. pilosa* (L.) Greene are distributed in the West Indies, Central America, northern, and north-eastern South America. Both species are planted in Venezuela for sand dune stability (Leon and Alain 1946; Tsurieil 1971). *Chamaecrista nictitans* (L.) Moench ssp. *patellaria* (DC. ex Collad.) Irwin et Barneby var. *glabrata* (Vogel) Irwin et Barneby is distributed throughout Mexico and South America. It is cultivated for green manure in India, Taiwan, and Indonesia while the leaves and stems are used as a substitute for tea in

Japan (Burkill 1966; Ching-chang and Chia 1965; Stone 1970; Whyte et al. 1953;). *C. nictitans* ssp. *patellaria* var. *ramosa* is distributed in tropical America and experimentally cultivated for green manure and soil covering in Malaysia and Indonesia (Burkill 1966; Uphof 1968; Whyte et al. 1953). The tropical Asia and Australian distributed species, *C. pumila* (Lam.) K. Larsen is cultivated for green manuring and soil protection (Burkill 1966; Chopra et al. 1956; Uphof 1968; Whyte et al. 1953).

Showy partridge pea has very limited cultivation on a wide scale. However, the species could be cultivated as a new multi-functional crop. For example, showy partridge pea could be grown in close proximity as a companion crop with various non-leguminous vegetables with the potential to provide added defense against insect pests. Showy partridge pea could

Fig. 2 Ten to fifteen linear oblong leaflets oblique at the leaflet base and a *cup shaped* gland beneath the lowest pair (Photo D. Knauft 2008)



Fig. 3 Reddish spots and purple anthers are visible (Photo D. Knauft 2008)



provide the food source for predator species such as ants and wasps, thereby protecting vegetable species from invading insects. Wild life viewing is popular

among sports enthusiasts in the United States. Showy partridge pea could be grown in fields as food for various wild life such as wild pheasant or quail.

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